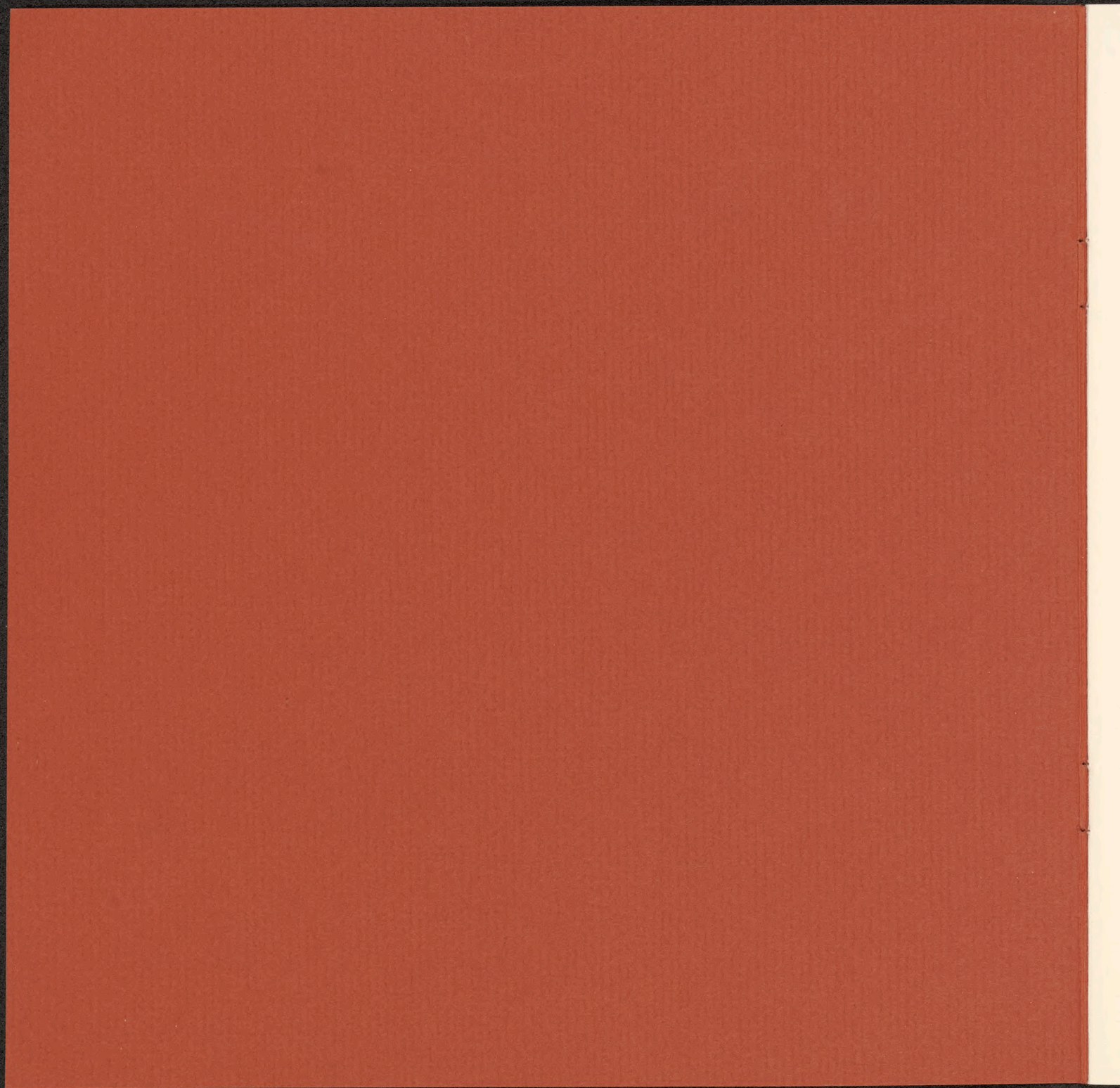




WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY
COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS





This exhibition is one of a series of individual photography exhibitions supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a Federal agency, and the Polaroid Corporation. The series is co-organized by Associate Director and Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin.

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frontispiece: *Side of Warehouse—Newbern, Alabama*

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THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY
COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS



William Christenberry is an artist who happens to use the camera as a necessary part of his wide ranging artistic activity. He was trained at the University of Alabama in the classical manner given to fine arts students of the 1950s: the then current values of New York painting, especially embodied in the form of his abstract-expressionist-imbued teacher Melville Price, were imparted to Christenberry in a manner that in turn made him paint in the broad, "non-objective" style. But even as early as 1959, Christenberry wanted to get beyond making the *gesture* of painting for its own sake—the active unadorned gesture was nearly sacrosanct in the art instruction of the time everywhere in the United States—and instead to find his own "subject matter." Thus, in that year, he began using a Brownie camera to create images which, in his word, were intended as a "reference" for his painting and drawing activity. The photos would then be drymounted on mat board and used in much the way nineteenth century artists used photographs, either their own or others', as convenient fragmentary guidelines. Christenberry's photographs were color images from the beginning; it made sense, he says, to work in color since he was painting in color. The artist's chromatic sense, both in his painting and in the sculpture, has always been exceedingly sophisticated; Christenberry is a natural colorist.

None of the Brownie snapshots from the first three years survives; the earliest existing photos date from 1962. In this year the artist received initial encouragement to treat the photographs as objects valuable in their own right. This awareness came from his friend and mentor Walker Evans, whom Christenberry met in 1961 and with whom he was to maintain a close relationship until Evans' death in 1975. The early subject matter for Christenberry's photographs was confined to the graveyards near his parents' home in Greensboro, Alabama, and the many country shacks in the same vicinity. A pattern was in fact established that continues to the present time: Christenberry returns every summer to Hale County from Washington, D.C. with his wife, Sandra, and their two young children. There he spends three weeks photographing and adding to his collection of old weathered metal signs and other artifacts. The

3. *Grave with Heart-Shaped Wreath—Hale County, Alabama*

subject matter for the photographs has broadened, year by year, as the artist gradually includes other kinds of objects—abandoned automobiles or barns or roadside cafes or simply broad country landscapes—into his repertory, but he has continued to develop the original subjects, gravesites and old buildings, sometimes photographing the same site for as many as seven consecutive years.

The artist emphasizes that his activity does not divide into painting, drawing, sculpture building, sign collecting, assemblage, photography—it is all one endeavor for him, and this fact is evident in the photographs themselves. They cannot quite be seen within the “classical” tradition of photography as conducted through Stieglitz, Weston, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans and the rest. They are so artlessly composed, particularly in the Brownie shots, that one is taken aback upon first seeing them. Yet somehow the early works are the photographs of a sculptor. And they are always about color.

The images presently under consideration are later and somewhat different. In them we are seeing not only a dramatic increase in print size (20 x 24 inches as opposed to the 3½ x 5 inches of the snapshots) but greater complexity of subject and compositional expansiveness. The earlier Brownie photographs tend to frame a single object, building or tombstone, in the center of the format; the compositions are relatively closed, near to their subject and often intimate. Size and scale work together to create the world in miniature. The move to a large format camera, an 8 x 10 Deardorff, didn't occur until the summer of 1977, but it was several years in coming. Perhaps the most important concrete influence leading Christenberry to expand his camera's purview and the size of the prints themselves was the urging of Lee Friedlander, Caldecot Chubb, and Christenberry's close friend, William Eggleston. Eggleston and Christenberry continually look at each other's work and inevitably this results in a mutual pressure of influence. Certain obvious similarities exist—both photographers are focusing primarily on their native Southern environments (though Eggleston also works extensively in other regions and in many styles); both work in color; both are moving increasingly



into large-format Ektacolor prints. (Eggleston has in the past been most commonly identified with the dye transfer process.) But the differences are profound. Christenberry is always more straightforward and more static, considered, quiescent in his choice of subject and in his compositional framings than is Eggleston. Despite the recently expanded framings and format, and the increased complexity of the compositions, Christenberry continues to make images whose chief characteristic is clarity, both of design and of palette.

The images in the present exhibition fall into several types. First is the familiar grave scene, whose palette, most strikingly in *Grave with Heart-Shaped Wreath—Hale County, Alabama*, works from the warm, rich clay color of the Alabama earth. Points of blue and lavender and green seem pictorially superimposed as a draughtsman adds nuance, making a chromatic field whose character is profoundly painterly. Another type is exemplified in *Green Warehouse—Newbern, Alabama*, a photograph restricted to the range of greens with only earthtones as anchoring points: not even the sky adds color here. (The use of white rather than sharply blue sky is intentional: most of the works in this large-scale series were shot on somewhat overcast days. The intensity of sky blue seems to be an uncontrollable or chromatically overpowering element in the palette of the large-format works.) A third type in this group is a variation of a frequent approach in Christenberry's photographs from the earliest ones on—that of focusing on a wall surface, excluding horizon line or peripheral imagery, to concentrate on a matrix of texture, color, shape and line. These photographs are almost like drawings. A new element, however, comes into play in *Side of Warehouse—Newbern, Alabama*: the rusted metal units of the side of the building are similar in texture and design to the artist's own recent sculptures, made with sections of metal hammered onto wood surfaces. In fact this image was the first one to be printed in the 20 x 24 inch format, and inspired the artist to try others in this size.

The photograph of the black farm buildings perhaps foretells a departure for Christenberry; rarely in previous works does the artist open up the



range of view to this extent, allowing a sweep back into space and including "figures" (in this case three horses). It is a way of composing a photograph which may seem on the face of it more conventional, ordinary, than the previous ones; but this type of picture suggests, within the context of Christenberry's entire production, a new notion of ranginess which may in turn lead to an entirely new look both in the photographs and in the other media.

Christenberry's characteristic ingenuousness in the photographs, their patent qualities of simplicity and at moments naivete (we must remember that the artist never prints his own work) are in fact the qualities that give these works their own strength. It is a Southern insistence on portraying immediate plain life vs. the urge to make metaphors. And the artist is quite aware of this. He says about the photographs, "I've been making those photos over the years just for myself. I really didn't intend for them to be shown. And maybe for that reason, they're the most natural things I've done. I'd like my work to have the same directness and naturalness that the graves and the hand-painted signs have. But I'm a trained artist. I'm not sure I can be that unselfconscious." With these new, large-format works, of course, the artist is allowing a new complexity and even a certain conscious sophistication to enter into the works' esthetic. But they retain the tenaciously unurbane quality of the earlier Brownie photographs in their thorough clarity, their extremely controlled palette, and most of all in the underlying sense of rootedness in their own place which is at the heart of the Southern artist's work and being. Their fascination is now in their being works of art which make not a unified observation but a synthesis; they are at the same time carefully composed, abstractly conceived images, and forcefully presented depictions of scenes of the American rural South.

Jane Livingston



CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition consists of fifteen Ek74 prints executed by Dimension Color Labs, New York City, under the supervision of the artist and Caldecot Chubb. Image dimensions are 17³/₈x22 inches (44.1x55.9 centimeters), height preceding width, with the exception of Catalogue Numbers 1 and 2, which are the reverse. Paper size is 20x24 inches. Photographs courtesy Caldecot Chubb, New York City.

1. Providence Church - Perry County, Alabama, 1977
2. Child's Grave with Styrofoam Bear - Hale County, Alabama, 1977
3. Grave with Heart-Shaped Wreath - Hale County, Alabama, 1977
4. Child's Grave with Lavender Chrysanthemums - Hale County, Alabama, 1977
5. Side of Warehouse - Newbern, Alabama, 1978
6. 5¢ - Demopolis, Alabama, 1978
7. New Grave - Havana, Alabama, 1978
8. Kudzu - Near Akron, Alabama, 1978
9. Horses and Black Buildings - Newbern, Alabama, 1978
10. Green Warehouse - Newbern, Alabama, 1978
11. Kudzu and Road - Near Akron, Alabama, 1978
12. Wild Flowers - Near Greensboro, Alabama, 1978
13. Cotton Gin - Havana Junction, Alabama, 1978
14. Grave with Crimson Wreath - Near Greensboro, Alabama, 1978
15. High Kudzu - Near Akron, Alabama, 1978

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY

Born Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1936.

Received B.F.A. Degree from University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, 1958.

Received M.A. Degree from University of Alabama, 1959.

Taught at Memphis State University, Tennessee, 1962-68.

Associate Professor of Art at Corcoran School of Art, Washington, D.C., 1968-74.

Professor of Art at Corcoran School of Art, 1974 to present.

Received an individual fellowship in photography from the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., 1976.

Received a commission from U.S. General Services Administration, Art-in-Architecture Program to create a wall work for the Jackson, Mississippi, Federal Building, 1978.

Lives Washington, D.C.

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1961 University of Alabama Gallery of Art, Tuscaloosa. (Paintings and drawings.)
- 1963 Memphis State University Gallery of Art, Tennessee. (Paintings and drawings.)
- 1967 Mary Chilton Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee. (Paintings and drawings.)
- 1970 Henri Gallery, Washington, D.C. (Sculpture and drawings.)
- 1971 Henri II Gallery, Washington, D.C. (Sculpture and drawings.)
- 1972 University of Maryland, Baltimore County. (Sculpture and drawings.)
- 1973 Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Brochure with statements by Nina Felshin and Walker Evans. (Photographs.) Exhibition traveled to The Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland.
Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C. (Photographs.)
Henri I Gallery, Washington, D.C. (Sculpture and drawings.)
The Octagon House, American Institute of Architects, Washington, D.C. Brochure. (Photographs.)
- 1974 Henri I Gallery, Washington, D.C. (Sculpture.) Henry II, Washington, D.C. (Paintings.)
- 1976 University of Alabama Art Gallery, Tuscaloosa. (Photographs.)
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. (Photographs.)
Zabriskie Gallery, New York City. (Photographs and sculpture.)

- 1977 University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany. (Photographs.)
Sander Gallery, Washington, D.C. Brochure. (Photographs.)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1969- Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida.
- 1970 "The Washington Painters." Catalogue with introduction by James Harithas.
- 1970 Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland. "Washington: Twenty Years." Catalogue with essays by Diana F. Johnson, Ellen Hope Cross, Arlene Corkery. (Sculpture.)
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. "New Sculpture: Baltimore - Washington - Richmond." Catalogue with introduction by Renato Danese.
- 1971 Museum of Fine Art, St. Petersburg, Florida, and the Jacksonville Art Museum, Florida. "Transparent and Translucent Art." Catalogue. (Sculpture.)
Art Gallery, State University College at Potsdam, New York, and University Art Gallery, State University of New York at Albany, New York. "Washington Art." Catalogue with introduction by Renato Danese. (Sculpture.)
Corcoran Gallery of Art - Dupont Center, Washington, D.C. "Corcoran Photography Workshop Second Invitational."
Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina. "Eight Washington Artists." Catalogue with introduction by Gunther Stamm. (Sculpture.)

- 1972 The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. "Second Annual Exhibition of Washington Artists: Paintings, Sculpture, Drawings and Graphics." Catalogue. (Drawing.)
- 1973 Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C. "Six Washington Photographers."
- 1974 Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York. "Straight Color." (Photographs.)
- 1975 Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland. "14 American Photographers." Catalogue with introduction by Renato Danese. Exhibition traveled to Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; The Fort Worth Art Museum, Texas.
- 1976 Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York. "Spectrum." (Photographs.) Basel Art Fair, Switzerland. "Art 7 '76." (Photographs.)
- 1977 "The Contemporary South." An exhibition of photographs and poetry organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art for the International Communications Agency (formerly United States Information Agency). Traveled to Madrid, Tehran, Paris and Brest, France, Oslo, Stockholm, Bucharest, Lisbon, Hong Kong, Peking, Tokyo and five other Japanese cities, Islamabad, Pakistan. Several catalogue/brochures were published by individual I.C.A. overseas posts.
- Galerie Zabriskie, Paris, France. "10 Photographes contemporains/tendances actuelles aux Etats-Unis."

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut. "Five Years of Collecting Photographs."

Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington. "Contemporary Color Photography—an Invitational Exhibit."

Photokina, Kunsthalle, Cologne, West Germany, and Arles, France. "The Second Generation of Colour Photographers" (organized by Camera magazine). Photokina catalogue.

Morgan Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri. "William Christenberry - William Eggleston—Color Photographs."

Longwood Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, Boston. "Bill Christenberry - Walker Evans—Photographs."

- 1978 Vision Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts. "8x10x10." (Photographs.)

The Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire. "By the Side of the Road." Catalogue. (Photographs.)

Neue Sammlung, Staatliches Museum für angewandte Kunst, Munich, West Germany. "Amerikanische Landschaftsfotographie." Catalogue with text by Klaus-Jürgen Sembach.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts. "The Presence of Walker Evans." Catalogue with essays by Isabelle Storey and Alan Trachtenberg.

Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California San Diego at La Jolla. "Micro-sculpture: Small scale tableaux and architectural sculptures."

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Kramer, Hilton. "Art: Feininger's Visionary Style," *The New York Times*, December 24, 1976, p. C-16.

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Sollins, Susan. "William Christenberry at Henry I and Henri II," *Art in America*, vol. 62, no. 4, July-August 1974, p. 93.

Tannous, David. "Capital Art: In the Major Leagues?" and "Those Who Stay," *Art in America*, vol. 66, no. 4, July-August 1978, pp. 70-87, 135.

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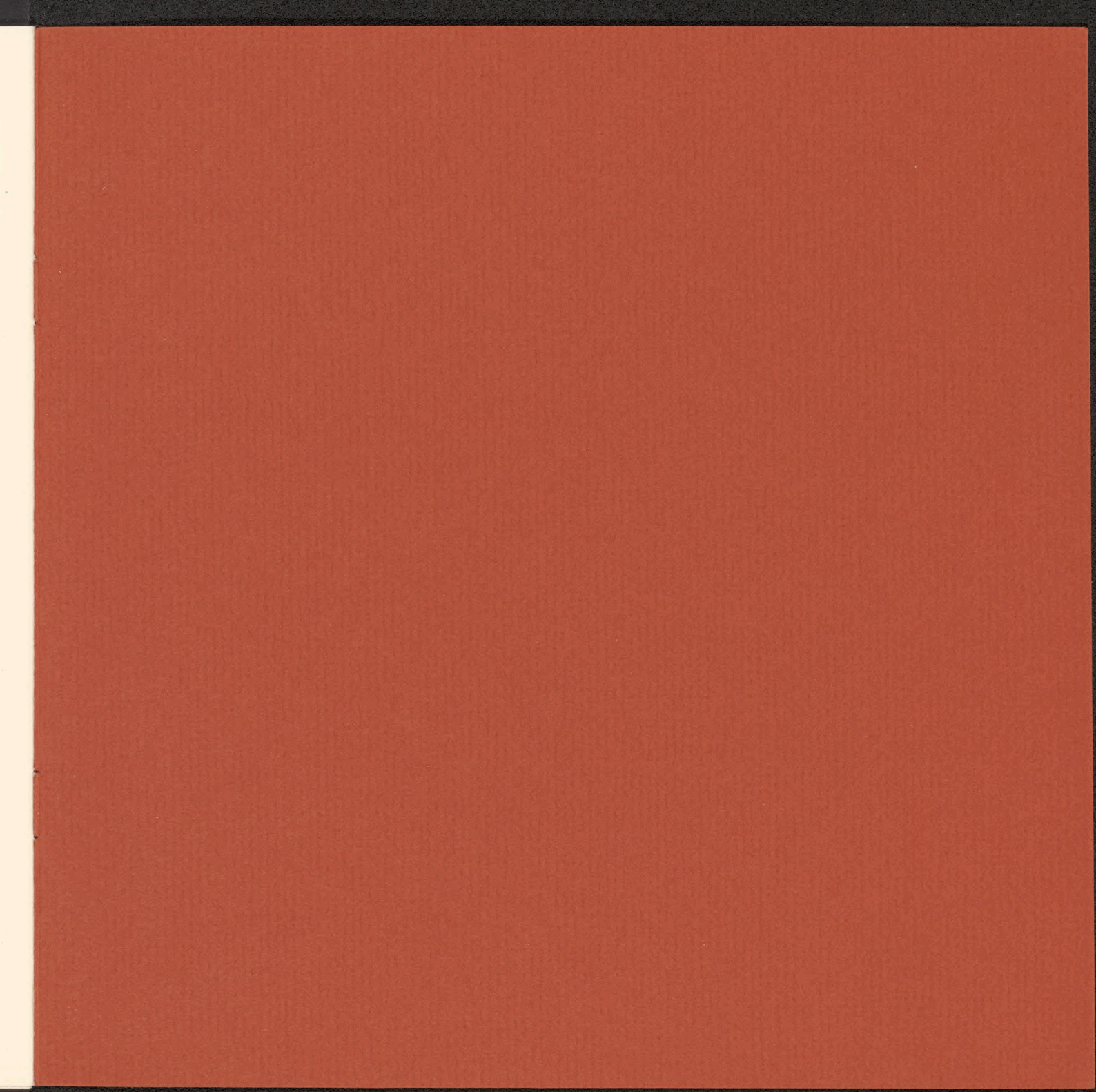
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